

Review of Effie Rentzou, *Littérature malgré elle: le surréalisme et la transformation du littéraire* (Paris: Pleine Marge, 2010), 358 pp.

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Review

Littérature malgré elle: le surréalisme et la transformation du littéraire by Effie Rentzou

Review by: Stephen Forcer

The Modern Language Review, Vol. 107, No. 4 (October 2012), pp. 1232-1234

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of space. The problem with such design is that it conceives of space as an object in itself rather than as the site of lived experience. The phenomenological method, which is about *how it feels* to live in a given space, could therefore be usefully applied to architecture.

In his reflections on the role of landscape in modernist art and literature, Martin Leer seeks to revise the critical commonplace that modernism is a predominantly urban or metropolitan phenomenon, as well as one concentrated on an inner, 'psychic' world. He seeks rather to show the degree to which modernism is about the landscape that lies around us and our cities. The originality of this view is in Leer's theory that, rather than disappearing in modernist art, landscape undergoes a phenomenological reduction in the works of such artists as Braque, Kandinsky, and Klee. This becomes a new way to understand the abandonment of visual perspective, with all the ideological baggage it carries, in favour of colour fields and other kinds of 'sensuous surface' which none the less retain their character as the landscape inhabited by the artist.

Other contributors show the ways in which phenomenology and modernism historically have been not just parallel but intersecting discourses. Ariane Mildenberg cites Wallace Stevens on Husserl, where the poet speaks of an 'enormous a priori' in the human mind as a potentially poetic concept. Pursuing the subject of Stevens, H. W. Fawcner reads the familiar poem 'The Snow Man' as an instance of the *epoché* in which the vanishing of the ego is as crucial as are other forms of bracketing. Among the essays on poetry, Matt Ffytche writes with great sensitivity on George Oppen, as does Jean-Jacques Wünenburger on Yves Bonnefoy. On the whole, the essays in this volume relate the discourse of phenomenology more successfully to poetry than to prose fiction, and had I more space I would explain why the concluding chapters of Joyce's *Ulysses* are not exactly the 'return to bourgeois hetero-normativity' (p. 268) claimed by Minna Niemi and Justin Parks. However, Michel Collot's masterful demonstration of how 'phenomenology gives back to literature its dimension of experience' (p. 319) ought to be enough to satisfy any reader of this welcome volume of essays.

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DAVID SPURR

Littérature malgré elle: le surréalisme et la transformation du littéraire. By EFFIE RENTZOU. Paris: Pleine Marge. 2010. 358 pp. €30. ISBN 978-2-9537263-0-5.

This outstandingly capable and consistent study is based on two main objectives: (1) to think through a founding paradox in which Surrealism sets itself against literature but also produces a vast body of written work that expands psycholiterary possibilities, and in so doing produce not the 'essence' of literature but rather a mapping of Surrealism's 'diverses problématisations du littéraire et de ses conventions' (p. 8); (2) to analyse in detail the work and history of selected Greek writers associated with Surrealism, including their relationship to the self-styled Surrealist executive in Paris, all of which offers a case study of Surrealism's re-

lationship to literature. In pursuit and extension of these aims, excellent specific sections are devoted to Surrealism and poetics, genre (particularly proverbs and songs), and rhetoric, with work by Breton, Calas (Kalamaris), Éluard, Elytis, Embiricos, and Gatsos singled out for extended commentary. The study is extremely well written, maintaining clarity even during its most complex moments, and the author has consulted and referenced a formidable body of material (it is a pity that this has not been reflected by the presence of an index). The book sets about its task with patience and structure, assiduously drawing out the ways in which Surrealist writers break down and blend different literary genres in service of Surrealism as a lived experience, and exposing the inadequacies of the idea that Surrealist activity conducted outside of France is necessarily secondary, derivative, or inauthentic. Parallel French translations of Greek texts are given throughout, and there is no doubting the author's expert and finely nuanced knowledge of Surrealism in either its French or its Greek forms. Indeed, the sophisticated ability to frame work in both languages is one of the book's distinguishing features, and the breadth of Rentzou's knowledge and research produces strong, coherent discussions in a series of related areas, such as the productive tensions in play between Surrealism and the traditions of Greek literature and philosophy (automatic writing versus *logos*, for instance), and the fine-level intertextuality with Greek and French writers that she demonstrates in work by Gatsos. Certainly, Greek and non-Greek specialists alike may be left wanting further analysis of the formal 'grécité' of the Greek texts themselves, with more attention given to the phonology, wordplay, and textual character of the writing in its original form, in addition to Surrealist themes and content that are all presented compellingly but which are more interchangeable between Greek texts and their French translations (Eros, 'approchements insolites', dreamscapes, and so on). The book's meticulous balance and scene-setting could also be complemented by just a little more appetite for critically minded reflection and polemic, which would help to get the most out of a wonderfully rich body of quoted material. It is clear, for instance, that the relative exclusivity of access to Surrealist 'literature'—in terms of readership, as well as a practice routinely undertaken by men benefiting from material and cultural capital—has more to bring to the thesis that Surrealism, despite and because of its worst intentions, represents a paradoxical destruction–expansion of literature. A greater degree of personalized argument (beyond exposition) could also be achieved via the instructive—but only partially explicit—demonstration of the power dynamics and cultural politics signalled both by the excitement and borderline hero-worship aroused in some Greek writers by Surrealist figureheads, and by Breton's largely indifferent or hostile reaction towards (would-be) Surrealist work written in languages other than French. Some readers may query or disagree with points made at the end of the book in which the author acknowledges elegantly critical work on the fraught gender politics of orthodox Surrealism—if not significant individual publications, such as those by Susan Rubin Suleiman—but settles for the view that Surrealism's wider project to find altered spaces, forms, experiences, and ways of living effectively obliged the Surrealists to 'other' women as erotic objects (ulti-

mately, it may be the case that Greek history and culture are particularly well suited to the comparative answering of questions about why orthodox Surrealism did not involve homosexuality or bisexuality within aspirations to individual or collective anti-authoritarian 'revolt'). In fairness, though, Rentzou comes primarily to the question of femininity in order to delimit her own work and, indeed, rightly to highlight gender and sexual politics within several possible directions of travel for future research on Surrealism's (anti-)literary project. Modest in style but intimidatingly thorough and well organized, this book points emphatically to the benefits of reasoned, comparative study of Surrealist texts, and represents a very substantial contribution to the field.

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STEPHEN FORCER

Modernism and Nihilism. By SHANE WELLER. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 2011. viii+182 pp. £16.99. ISBN 978-0-230-23104-7.

Shane Weller's latest addition to the critical material on nihilism is a departure from his previous works on the subject. *Literature, Philosophy, Nihilism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) and *A Taste for the Negative* (London: Legenda, 2005) both dealt extensively with historical and literary constructions of nihilism in a nuanced manner, but owing to the nature of the beast—*Modernism and Nihilism* is a work in the 'Modernism and ...' series—his latest work is brisker, and feels brusquer as a result. Unlike the other two books, each of which extends to over two hundred pages of detailed arguments, this third work in the field is the product of a need to convey as much information as possible in a limited amount of space, within the remit pre-established for it. This does not detract from Weller's ability to write, and write well, and he has clearly incorporated a lot of more recent research in the field; however, the density of concepts herein make this book seem hurried, as he moves between people, concepts, philosophies, and movements at a whistle-stop pace.

The work itself is divided into three sections, the first two corresponding to modes of modernism (philosophical and aesthetic), the third dealing with the ubiquitous what-came-after of modernism, postmodernism. As a result of this, despite Weller's keen insights and thorough research, the origins of and response to Nietzsche's philosophy all fit into the first sixty pages, and, when keyed into the field of nihilism, placed in a broadly European context, this obviously lacks the subtlety of his earlier analyses. This is necessary context, given the topic and the scale of the problem Weller has taken on, and he does discuss the key arguments (such as nihilism being inherent to, or an aspect of, European modernity and modernism, and the distinctions between the two), but it means that by the time he deals with the aesthetic components of the relationship between modernism and nihilism, the discussions of Flaubert, Dada, Kafka, Blanchot, Beckett, Celan, and others, and side mentions of others such as Hemingway and Stein, lack sufficient depth. Then to drop Husserl, Heidegger, Adorno, Lukács, and others into the mix is a recipe for information overload. It is thus a 'partial' work, more like an anthology in terms of